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The Band's Robbie Robertson: Too many people's lives have been claimed by 'the road'

It took a 'raw' director to put the Band on film

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

TORONTO — When The Band, the most universally respected rock 'n' roll group of all, performed its last concert after 16 years on the road, they called it 'The Last Waltz.'

The show, which took place in San Francisco in November 1976, was a celebration of survival — both of the quintet itself and of the music they uphold — and the group invited its musical friends along for the ride.

There was Bob Dylan (with whom they gained prominence), Ronnie Hawkins (with whom they got their start), and Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Ron Wood, Ringo Starr, Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton, Paul Butterfield, Dr. John, Neil Diamond, and others.

The show was more than just a media event — it was a great concert, one of the greatest rock concerts ever held. It was monumental, but it was also a good time.

Now the film of the concert, directed by Martin Scorcese (of 'Taxi Driver' and 'Mean Streets' fame), has been released — to arrive in Montreal on May 12 — as well as a three-disc soundtrack recording.

Robbie Robertson, guitarist, songwriter and leader of The Band, returned to his hometown Toronto recently to talk about the circumstances surrounding the event and the music of the group that has taken rock 'n' roll to its highest art form.

'Was a good feeling'

Only this group could bring all these 'stars' together on one stage and make it work musically.

"Yeah, it was a good feeling," said Robertson, who joined the Toronto musicians union at the age of 13 in 1959 and had already written hits songs for Hawkins two years later.

"The people were so giving and generous and loving, and they felt great that they even knew they had this capability. It was wonderful to see that these egos were not going crazy. There were no managers screaming and yelling 'He's not going going on following him' and all that. There wasn't a peep."

After 16 years on the road — from bars and dives to the best concert and arena stages in the world — The Band were not about to press their luck.

"Maybe it was superstition," says Robertson, "but too many people's lives have been claimed by the road — from Buddy Holly to Janis Joplin to Elvis Presley."

So the group — which includes Canadians Robertson, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel and Rick Danko (all from southern Ontario) and Arkansas drummer Levon Helm — decided to end it all with a flourish and a film, the first rock music film to be shot in 35 millemeter.

A logical choice

The logical choice to direct 'The Last Waltz' was Scorcese, who rounded up several Academy Award cinematographers to capture this once-in-a-lifetime musical event.

"Scorcese is the only American filmaker that has a knowledge of this music," ssays Robbie. "I mean, I could've asked anybody, but he's the only show in town. At the same time, he was probably the worst person I could've chosen because of his own scheduling.

"He was in the process of finishing a film ('New York, New York'), he had a Broadway play he was going into and a documentary. But he was so impressed by the music and the people involved that he couldn't resist it.

"And we couldn't resist him: it was obviously from 'Mean Streets' that he was very into the music that we grew up on. He has a rawness in his style that I thought was essential. I didn't want anybody who was gonna make a cutesy little film. This film is anti-slick, anti-pop."

Eighty per cent of the film is comprised of footage from the concert, supplemented by two songs recorded in an MGM studio (featuring Emmylou Harris and the Staples Singers) and interviews done at The Band's Shangri-La Studio in Malibu, California.

"In these stories and reminiscences you understand the feeling behind the music. Scorcese thought it essential that anybody could feel the music: you didn't have to be just a rock 'n' roll fanatic, the film wasn't just to prove how hip you are or anything like that. It was for everybody to relate to in a human way: there are people there, not just the glorious lights. These are characters and that's what Scorcese's film's are, character studies."

Does Robertson — tall, handsome, well-dressed and who never says anything gratuitous — see anything special in the fact that half a dozen of these masters of rock 'n' roll are Canadians?

"That's a very complicated question when you stop to think about it. You don't know whether to think of it genetically or whatever, because there is no real rock 'n' roll foundation in Canada.

"You never thought of R 'n' R as being 'foreign' because it was on the radio. The only thing I know — and Levon talks about this in the film — is that for some strange reason, 75 per cent of rock 'n' roll comes from the 100 miles radius where Levon grew up, from Clarkesdale, Mississippi to Memphis.

Approached film agency

"All those people come from there — Elvis, Conway Twitty, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and all the black ones, Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, Bo Diddley — God, the list goes on and on. The music did not come from Los Angelese or New York or Chicago, it came from down there because it was such a predominant way of life. Once everyone heard it, it just spread everywhere, it didn't matter where you were from."

The music spread to places like Simco, Stratford, London and Toronto, Ontario, where the members of The Band grew up. Before joining together, they played in groups with names like The Robots, the Consuls, the Rockin' Revols (short for Revolution), and they Capers, before joining Ronnie Hawkins as The Hawks.

It was this background that Robertson tried to reflect when he approached the Canadian Film Development Corporation six years ago with an idea for a film on the Band's roots and the necessity to leave Canada to make them stick.

"I hadn't been back here in a long time and I was really annoyed that we — whether it was us or Joni Mitchell or Neil Young or Mary Pickford or Norman Jewison — had to leave to do good. At that time, it irritated me that Canada was not getting its credit. Whether Canada was allowing that to happen or making it happen just irritated the hell out of me.

'I couldn't care less'

"I wanted to make this idea obvious so that perhaps people would be a little more conscious of it and thus make it possible to do things in Canada, whether it was Donald Sutherland or Genevieve Bujold.

"So I said that I couldn't care less. This was not a film about English speaking Canada versus French speaking Canada — that was their problem.
from the French side or the English side?

So I said that I couldn't care less. This was not a film about English speaking Canada versus French speaking Canada — that was their problem.

"I'm not a big patriot in that I don't run around with a big flag, but, still, the situation really annoyed me. I checked it out as far as my patience would take it, and that was it. They just bored me eventually and I had other projects and committments to consider."

Despite an end to touring, The Band is still very alive and well. Both Helm and Danko have produced solo records (Helm's RCO All-Stars play here at Cinema Outremomnt on May 3) and the group returns to Malibu to start recording a new album for which Robertson has written most of the songs. He is one of the most meticulous composers in rock today, a perfectionist, something the Band has been criticized for and a criticism that doesn't bother Robertson the slightest.

"What's too perfect?" he retorts. "We just do the best we can, that's where our musical education led us. We've always been serious about the musical part of rock 'n' roll. It's what we rely on and what The Band is about."

Finally, does Robertson miss Canada?

"Yeah, sure. I mean, all our folks are from here. But it's a matter of where you can work and do what you want to do, so that's why we live in the U.S."

Joan Rivers is banking everything on a 'Rabbit'

By DAVE HIRSHLEY

NEW YORK — For a woman who insists she is tiptoeing on the rim of disaster, Joan Rivers looks remarkable well. Her tiny 5-foot-2 frame is wired with energy and despite only three hours' sleep, there are no circles under the lively brown eyes. Nevertheless, she is worried sick about being a failure.

Never mind that after 12 years as a comedienne, she is the highest paid opening act in the history of show business at $55,000 a week. Forget

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the scores of appearances on the Johnny Carson show, the TV scripts she has written, the best-seller she authored.

Nothing matters now except 'Rabbit Test,' a wacky obstetric farce about the first pregnant man that opened yesterday in Montreal. Joan wrote it with collaborator Jay Redack. Worse, Joan had the chutzpah to direct it. And if this film's a turkey, boy, are they gonna rub her face in it!

Who is "they," one has to ask. From under a towel in her Plaza Hotel suite where she has gone to get her hair done, Joan utters a muffled "Hollywood." When Rivers offered him the script David Begelman, late of Columbia Pictures, told her manager she was crazy. The man from United Artists advised her to stick to needlepoint.

Dit it themselves

No studio would take a chance on a first-time woman director-writer who got the idea for a movie while reading gossip magazines under a beauty salon hair dryer. Can't trust those director persons, not after Elaine May spent two years editing 'Mikey and Nickey' and it lasted two weeks.

So she and husband Ed Rosenberg decided to produce the film themselves. To get the $1.5 million needed, they mortgaged their house in Beverly Hills. They also mortgaged Joan's father's house in Larchmont, the dinette set, even their 10-year-old daughter's savings bonds. "We hocked everything," said Joan, "short of pulling up the trees in Israel."

Everything — their future, their next movie (already written), Melissa's shoes — depends on whether people laugh at 'Rabbit Test.' The signs are encouraging. After seeing the final product, the same studios that rejected the idea bid to distribute the film. David Begelman told Rivers' manager she was a creative genius.

The Rosenbergs were invited to a Sue Mengers chili party. Still, Joan was miserable. At the Rochester preview, she stood in the back of the theater like the mother of the bride in a reception line, shaking hands, mumbling, "Thank you, thank you so much." When they laughed, she cried.

A pessimist

Just before she flew into New York, the film broke box office records in Nashville on a Friday night. Joan walked the floor until 4 a.m. What if nobody came on Saturday? An incurable pessimist, she carried doom with her at all times and applies it every five minutes the way some women would dab on powder.

A makeup artist arrived to prepare her for a photo session.

"Got your trowel?" she asked him. "God, you have a lot of work to do on this face." As he unpacks brushes and creams, the associate producer of 'Rabbit Test' comes bounding in from the bedroom.

Ten-year-old Melissa Rosenberg says she enjoyed helping her parents make the movie, riding her bike around the set on errands, testing actors on their lines, and passing out the peanuts that substitute for lunch on a low-budget set. However, she does not plan to make it her life's work. "I'd like to be a rock star," she explained.

Though his wife is the more visible, Edgar is very much the head of the Rosenberg household.

When making 'Rabbit Test' became Joan's obsession, Edgar moved out. The constant wooing for backers had exhausted both his emotional and financial resources. He came back two days later and signed his life away in promissory notes. They would make Joan's picture, but they would do it their way. To hell with studio cocktail parties and to hell with Hollywood.

What Hollywood?

"We don't really live in Los Angeles," Joan says. "We live in our house that happens to be there. I took my New York apartment and dumped it 3,000 miles away. What Hollywood? I still clean up after my dog. You think Elizabeth Taylor does that?"

If they don't lose the house, if 'Rabbit Test' makes it, Joan said they'll move back to New York "as fast as I can get my Bloomingdale's charge out of hock." New York is home, and nothing would be sweeter than to come home a success.

Joan Rivers: Humor based on 'I said it first'

Onstage and off, Joan's humor is self-lacerating; she is a female incarnation of the Woody Allen schlemiel who's caught with his angst down.

"My whole life is based on the philosophy of ha, ha, I said it first," Joan admits. "I mean, you don't have to tell me my slip is showing. Oh no, I said it first."

Would she call that insecure? "Absolutely," she said. "I am constantly miserable about something. But I wouldn't have it any other way. The risks are everywhere. But it's sososososo sweet when they work out."

It was very sweet, indeed, when David Begelman offered her a $3 million, three-picture deal with Columbia, and sweeter still to turn it down. Sure, studio money is nice security. But Joan and Edgar decided the independence was more important. Risky? Yes. "But it has it's rewards," she said. "No way do I have to stop at every booth and genuflect on my way into the Polo Lounge."

It was Woody Allen, a good friend who talked her into taking a different kind of risk four years ago, just about the time she was getting bored with standup comedy. "I said to Edgar, 'How many more house-keeping jokes, mother jokes, childbearing jokes can I write? I've written the definitive joke for me, whatever it is,'" Joan said. "In the middle of it all, Woody told me, 'Write!'"

So she wrote. First, with Redack, came 'Rabbit Test,' then a second film about a Bette Midler type performer called Rosy, and ultimately a book, entitled "Making It" about her seven-year apprenticeship in the Village.

All the while, she worked the clubs, from the big rooms in Vegas to the college cafeterias in Rochester.

"I can't just sit up in my Hollywood tower," she said. "I have to get out there and find out what they're laughing at. My therapy is the stage. It's a total primal scream. I do about 50 percent ad lib every show, which is risky, but I'm compelled. I want to know I'm funny.

"I know I'll never appeal to some people. I can't ever play a state fair. But neither did Lenny, Woody, Cavett."

And she does know which jokes to use where. "You save the Tolstoy jokes for the colleges," she said. "And in Vegas, give 'em the bazooms."

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

'Rabbit Test' contains well-aimed satire

RABBIT TEST
Loews, Monkland
Cine-parc Dollard

A Laugh or Die Production; directed by Joan Rivers; written by Joan Rivers and Jay Redack; starring Billy Crystal, Joan Prather, Alex Rocco, Doris Roberts, and with appearances by Imogene Coca, Roddy McDowall and Paul Lynde.

By LINDA CAHILL
of The Gazette

A pregnant man — is that really enough of a sight gag to power a whole film?

Joan Rivers thinks so. And the popular comedienne has sunk most of her own money into bringing off this independent film.

There's lots of broad slapstick humor and some well-aimed satire on revered American institutions like the rip-off medical profession, Vietnam vets and established religion. Even the Queen and the Pope come in for their lumps.

Innocent

Lionel Carpenter (played by Billy Crystal) is the unfortunate male. He's 24, trying to get from under his mother's thumb and teaches night school for immigrants.

Oh yes, he's a virgin and that's where his problems begin.

As the film opens we see him cozying up to a brunette on the sofa, trying to play the rakish seducer — only the girl is just a plastic doll and explodes in gis face as he tries to practice his lines.

The stage is set: When an old Vietnam buddy puts him in the path of a professional seductress, he thinks he's got it made.

Six weeks later he's throwing up in his immigrant class, enticing the sympathy of the only student who seems to understand English, a gypsy girl from an uproariously thievish family.

Passing lightly through the various stages of guilt (it must be my fault) to acceptance, Crystal is a winning presence as he tries to deal with his nagging mother, would-be exploiters and his sweet Gypsy girlfriend — and a swelling belly.

The scenario lets Rivers take funny potshots at everything from the abortion dialogue to fat girls to immigration.

Are the cliches about pregnancy funny when they're turned against a man? Yes, because Crystal is a lovable klutz who doesn't totally succumb to efforts to make his problem into a profit.

When the president of the United States, complete with cracker accent and pink plastic pig snout gets in on the act, the pregnant man is sent on a world tour good-will tour.

This allows for several inspired scenes: Grass-skirted natives sing 'Freres Jacques' in Harlem accents while bogeying about an African hut; the Pope receives Lionel, showing him his 'adidas,' "shoes of the fishermen" as a scarecrow pontiff waves at the masses in St. Peters' square.

Then an Indian woman leader — shades of the deposed Indira — starts complaining about Lionel. What if he starts a trend in male-pregancy? What about over-population doubling?

Adulation turns to hostility over night, and the admiring crowds turn on Lionel as quickly as they made him a star.

Ends happily

But all ends happily. Lionel disavows fame, flees to the countryside with his gypsy, and gives birth Christmas Eve — to a girl — while a voice from the heavens booms "oh my God."

Funny, yes. Like Woody Allen, a friend of director Rivers, or like Mel Brooks is funny.

But as one who fell asleep through 'Play it again Sam' and got bored half way into 'Blazing Saddles' I must say it has the same weaknesses as those other comic classics — there are lots of laughs but the basic idea isn't always strong enough to sustain a full length film.

As a first film though, and one with a light feminist touch at that, it's an achievement to be proud of.

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